

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Tony Kanaan

Chip Ganassi Racing
Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Great to see everyone today virtually. My name is Dave Furst. A very special announcement this morning from Chip Ganassi Racing that Tony Kanaan, 17-time race winner and of course the 2013 winner of the Indianapolis 500 and the 2004 NTT INDYCAR Series champion, TK will be returning to the team as part of a multiyear deal with Chip Ganassi Racing next year that will include four oval races for the series: Double-header at Texas Motor Speedway, of course the 105th running of the Indianapolis 500 and a return to Worldwide Technology Raceway. With that we welcome in TK and say congratulations.

Tony, this is the Last Lap 2.0? Is that how this works now?

TONY KANAAN: I don't even know anymore. I don't know what to call it. It's been a surreal last few days. This thing happened so quick. Although people would think different that this has been going on, this was obvious, it was never obvious. It took a lot of work from a lot of parties to make it happen, but it's cool.

So yeah, I don't know what to call it. Let's just call it I'm sharing the 48 with Seven-Time.

THE MODERATOR: That's right, this is the second half, if you will, of the 48 car on the team with seven-time NASCAR Cup champion Jimmie Johnson driving the road and street courses. This is a really good partnership. You two have gotten to know each other pretty well over the last couple years, haven't you.

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, coincidence or not, we share the same passion of triathlon. We're sponsored by the same bike company, which is Trex. We've been sharing workouts for a long time.

Even before I made this deal happen, when Jimmie announced that he was going to race in INDYCAR, he was here in Indianapolis. He came here to work out at Pit Fit. We went cycling together. It's going to be -- I think we're

going to be even fitter than we've ever been. We've been pushing each other already, so I don't know how that's going to be possible.

But yeah, it's a good fit.

THE MODERATOR: Before we get to questions, obviously it's an opportunity to return to Chip Ganassi Racing, which of course will celebrate its 13th NTT IndyCar Series championship, sixth, of course, with Scott Dixon, but Bryant returns, so does NTT. This is all coming together. This is a very special announcement here today.

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, if it wasn't for them and Chip, obviously this would not have happened. Bryant has been with me since 2003. NTT has been with me since I've joined Ganassi, and since I left Ganassi they came with me, as well, and now they're back.

You know, I have to blame a lot, if there is somebody to blame, number one, it would be my sponsors that when I came back saying maybe we should come back next year, David from NTT and then Justin and Margo from Bryant said, why not.

And then Jimmie for making that phone call. That phone call -- you know what is one of those things that you remember exactly the day, the clothes you were wearing, where you were and so on? I was actually on my bike working out, which is not a surprise, here at home, and the phone rang, and it was Jimmie. I'm like, whoa, I thought he was going to invite me to do a triathlon or something like that, and he popped the question, and I said, are you joking? I don't think we can pull this off.

But yeah, without the sponsors that would have never happened. And obviously Chip giving me the opportunity to come back.

I mean, how cool is that; know what I mean? I woke up this morning, I feel extremely lucky, man. I'm going to go back to a team with my best friend Dario Franchitti, my other best friend Scott Dixon, and now Jimmie. How cool is that to write a story afterwards when it's all over. I feel blessed. I can't thank everybody enough for pulling all this effort together, my family, my wife. She kind of knew that I wasn't giving up. I guess she's okay to put up with me for

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another couple years like that.

Q. I'm not real good at math, but if we've got a car with a seven-time cup champion and you're a 2004 INDYCAR champion, isn't that an eight-time champion car you've got there?

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, I think so. We can call it the eight-time. That's a good hashtag, #eighttime.

Q. I did a lot of interviews with you toward the last Indy 500 and last year's race at Gateway. You could tell you weren't ready to hang it up. How can you describe just the change in emotion from what has happened to you since that time where you admitted, hey, I want to come back but I don't have any rides, to today you're returning to a team that's one of the best in the business and also a team you've previously driven for?

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, I mean, I would say probably if it wasn't for the pandemic, I wouldn't probably have changed my mind. There were some talks about doing the 500 and on and off and this and that, but I wasn't clear.

And then when I said, this is not the way I want to go, I was fully aware that this was what I wanted, but that didn't mean that's what was going to happen.

But like anything in my life, it never came easy, and I made the decision, and if it didn't go through, I was going to have to own it. I put my head into it. I said, oh, well, I'm not going to give myself an option, I'm going to make it work, and luckily, like I said before, I have great partners like NTT and Bryant. And as soon as I came back with them, 7-Eleven is back, too, Big Machine is coming back, all of them.

But the two biggest ones were NTT and Bryant really that made this happen.

I was lucky then, but then that was step one, get the sponsorship. Step two, it was trying to find a place that would fit right, that would make the right decision and so and so, and that was a little bit more complicated. There was a few sleepless nights and talking to Jimmie every day, like come on, what's happening, and trying to -- if you think about it, look how many pieces of the puzzle we had to put together.

Jimmie had to get his deal first, which we didn't even know if it was going to be Ganassi at the time. Yeah, the deal happened really quick, but we've been talking about this on and off for quite a while. But in the beginning I really said argh, this is never going to happen. That was the

pessimistic side of me thinking it was going to be impossible to pull it off.

Q. How, does Jimmie have one more mentor with you because I imagine you'll be at all the races in one capacity or another?

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, I mean, look at Jimmie. Jimmie has the best mentor in the house, which is Dario Franchitti. That's not me. It's Dario's role. I think I can contribute for sure. I'll be there if he needs me, but with Dario -- obviously with me he's more like hey, how do I need to make my neck stronger, how do I make my shoulders stronger and this and that. I think the driving side, we have the best driver's coach in the business to do that, and that's not my intention to do so. But if he needs help, I'll definitely be around. But yeah, we've been talking a lot. Jimmie is an extremely committed guy, and he's been concentrating a lot on the task. That's what the guy does. We talk pretty much every day.

We haven't had a chance to celebrate together yet because of the pandemic and stuff, but after what he made me go through, I think it's more than worth it that he needs to buy me a few drinks.

Q. I wanted to clarify something with you first. You'd mentioned that you and Jimmie had been talking about this off and on for a little while. How recently did this become what felt like a realistic possibility? Was it over the last couple days, last couple weeks?

TONY KANAAN: A week ago. A week. Yeah, a week. You know, the talks were always there. As long as you're out of contract, you are talking to everybody, right. So I basically did. I was in negotiations with Larry. I was always up front with him. We talked to other teams. And in the meantime everything else was happening.

We got it done in amazingly record time, for how complicated the deal was.

Q. You said that if not for the pandemic that 2020 very likely would have been your last year. I imagine the lack of fan interaction both at the 500 and at other races that you were running in 2020 had to have played into this. How important is that hopefully at some point in 2021 or 2022 that we have that back for you to put a cap on things for your career?

TONY KANAAN: Well, I think that was the only reason really that I said I wanted to come back. I mean, there is no other reason -- I mean, yeah, do I want to win the 500? 100 percent. Am I in the best place to do so? 100 percent now. Those are the details. But the sole decision to come

back from day one was because it wasn't fair for the fans.

Never in a million years did I thought I would come back for two more times, which became a pleasant surprise because then I give myself another caution that if it's not sort of a normal year next year then I have hopefully for sure a normal year in 2022. But that was the only reason really.

Q. The ability to return to a team like Chip Ganassi Racing, I know when someone -- an INDYCAR driver, I just was looking through it, there haven't been too many INDYCAR drivers that have spent a significant part of their career there and been able to come back for a second time. What do you imagine that opportunity and that ability these next two years to be like?

TONY KANAAN: I mean, first of all, that shows how much respect and in good terms I've always been with the teams that I've worked with. I've never closed a door. I spent four years there, and I told Chip at the time I didn't think I delivered as much as I should have and I needed to go, and we went away.

To be honest, come back, having an opportunity like this in the last two years of my career, it's something that I'm not taking for granted. I mean, I talked to Chip last night, and we have one goal. It's to make this team win the 500. Chip just told me, I added another big chance to do so with you, and that's my role, and that's what I'm here for.

Like I said, I feel very humbled that I have these eight races in the next two years to do it. I don't think commitment is a problem with me. I think you guys have been following me for quite a while. I think I'm in shape, and I'm ready to do so.

Arguably some people said my best results came on the ovals, so let's please the people that think that and let's go win another 500.

Q. I imagine you'll be one of the most active people in the lobbying effort to try to get some more ovals on the schedule for 2022 before you hang things up?

TONY KANAAN: I already sent a text to Mark Miles and Roger Penske saying, how about this track, how about that track. More ovals for sure.

Q. What was it about the first stint with the Ganassi team that's got you wanting to come back to this team? Clearly you've got a great vibe with those guys and you know so many guys as well as you do, but to be able to come back and do this again with them.

TONY KANAAN: Right, as a race car driver you want to race for the best team, for the winning team. They have proven on and off that they are one of the top teams to beat, and as a race car driver, being selfish, that's where you want to be. It doesn't matter who you want to. You want to be on a winning team and a big organization that has a lot of resources and so on.

It's not a hard decision; know what I mean? It's like you're asking a kid if he wants to go for an ice cream. It was obvious.

I have a lot of friends there. I kept a lot of friends there since I left, so it's just -- like I got so many texts this morning from the boys in that shop, and it's just like, hey, welcome back, and we just started talking. I talked to Barry. Barry Wanser, which is the team manager there, our sons Leo and Robert are best friends. Robert spends sleepless nights here at the house when Leo is here for holidays and stuff, and it felt like I never left really. The relationship and the respect was always there, so it's not new, I guess.

Q. Was there something Jimmie said specifically that got you hooked in this conversation, or was it just kind of something that was always there and you just needed it all to fall together?

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, Jimmie just said let's make a dream team and let's make history together. We're two 45-year-old guys that some people believe we can do it but a lot of people believe we can't, so let's prove them wrong. He didn't have to say much, man.

Q. I wanted to ask, are you able to tell us how many other options you had, and were they good options, and did that kind of bolster your self-belief that you could go and do a Ganassi car justice?

TONY KANAAN: It wasn't that many because if you think about it, you're trying to look for -- I wanted to do the four ovals again when I said that, and really the realistic option was Larry, because none of the other teams wanted to split a car or do anything like that.

Vaguely a long time ago I talked to Ed, but Ed and I, we wanted the same thing, so it was not a possibility there. So not really. To be honest, I did -- did I make a ton of phone calls? 100 percent, but it was never a negotiation in place because it didn't make sense.

So then it went to trying to make a decision, so I just go and try to do Indy with all my sponsors and that's it. That would open up more possibilities. But the realistic one was

Larry, and then obviously the most obvious one was this one because it was just like meant to be, I guess. How often do you see somebody like Jimmie trying to -- I'm not doing the -- I guess it's just one of those things in life that happens once in a lifetime.

And I have to apologize because you wrote the most -- a great article that I loved it, and now you're going to have to rewrite it I guess in a few years.

Q. We need more great races to talk about. I also wanted to ask if this opens the door for you to be part of Chip's Cadillac team in the IMSA enduro run or maybe more of them?

TONY KANAAN: That's totally up to Chip. Obviously he put me in a car before, he gave me my Daytona 24-hour win, so I'm available. But that's his decision. We haven't really talked about it. It's one of those things that I know if he needs somebody and if he wants me to do it, I'll be available. If not, I'm pretty sure he will have plenty of capable guys. I have a guy like Scott Dixon that you probably know of him that is probably ahead of the line there.

Q. Obviously this is a bit of an adjustment in terms of the final laps now coming in a car that's able to win races, and it's a really competitive opportunity for you. How do you feel about the enjoyment that you're going to feel because I know obviously every driver wants to be at the front and winning races, but are you still going to be able to enjoy this opportunity with the little bit of added pressure that's going to come with driving a car that's capable of winning the races and being at the front?

TONY KANAAN: 100 percent. I think -- my entire career was racing under pressure, and I think I perform better when I'm under pressure. It adds a lot to it. The enjoyment, it's always going to be there. Once you're driving a race car, in my opinion, you always enjoy it, but you enjoy it even more when you're winning, and you add the pressure to it, I think it's -- for me it's the best combination. I mean, Chip is in the business to win races. That's all he cares. I mean, and he won't save you if he has something to tell you.

To me it's a great problem to have, that butterfly in your stomach from now on. It's like, wow, now I have to do it. I have some tough teammates there that I'm going to have to be on top of my game because the team is going to give me everything I need with no excuses to win races.

Been there before a few times, and I think it's totally manageable.

Q. And you mentioned earlier about leaving Ganassi and that it was just the right time for you and you felt like it was the correct decision at the time. That was that really. Does it feel like any kind of unfinished business going back there, you can help them out and make a big impact on this organization, and it's kind of like a bit of unfinished business from the last time you were there, I guess?

TONY KANAAN: 100 percent. I got a second chance to redeem myself and give Chip another 500 win, and hopefully I will do that, work with my teammates to make the team stronger, as well, and if I can win -- try to help them to do so, this is something that, again, I keep saying it's probably one of the best opportunities of my career. It's the best opportunity for me to leave this series, because I am telling you this time for sure in two years I will not be racing when I'm 50, but I said that two years ago.

To leave on a high note, that would be great. I will do everything I can to do it.

Q. What advantage is this to yourself going back to a team obviously that you know inside out in terms of getting up to speed with the car, you've worked with Dixie, you've worked with Dario, but obviously now you've got Alex Palou coming in and Marcus Ericsson who obviously you haven't worked with. How much of an advantage for you is it going into the team now?

TONY KANAAN: I mean, I think, like I said, it's not new. I know the guys. I mean, we talked about it today with Barry. They have my seat. They know my measurements. I was just there three years ago. It's just going to be like we took -- like it was a long "pandemic" and we're just coming back to work and that's it. Getting to know Palou will be nice. I think he's a young gun that has a lot of potential for the future. Ericsson, I know Ericsson; we've been cycling together for quite a bit. I have not worked with him. And Dixon is Dixon. We hang around all the time. He actually just texted right now congratulating me. He's in England.

Really it's not -- I don't need a transition. I think it's just going to be back to work.

Q. And the aim obviously is to win the 500 with Chip then, correct? Is that the focus?

TONY KANAAN: I told Chip I'll win four races for him next year if that was good enough. He said, that's totally fine. So yes. Yeah, the 500 would be the priority for sure.

Q. I was just doing a little review of your career and



noticed that you didn't finish worse than eighth in the time you won the championship, and you had a very consistent run with KB Racing Technologies when you won there for your Indy. Fact, Lotus, come on, you finished P4 in a Lotus and P5 in the season. I mean, that's just an interesting reflection. What gets me, though, is this is a -- I recognize as you recognize what a great chance it is to be with Ganassi again. I just think it's a tremendous opportunity. What do you see are the biggest challenges? You've been there before. You've got all these people, a couple new drivers to know, but what are the real challenges for you?

TONY KANAAN: Two things: One, they have improved the car there since I left, so to try to get used to the car as quick as I can, and I think the biggest challenge is not doing it every race. This year I felt it quite a bit on the first race to try to get back up, like you're not doing day in, day out. I've done this for 23 years driving pretty much every weekend or most of the weekends, and when you take a break like we did this year, the first time you get back in the car, especially with the limited testing because of COVID, it took me a little bit.

I think we have a pretty good program with that. I think I'm going to be testing the car eventually in the oval before I go to the first race, which is good. Those I think will be the two biggest challenges for me.

Q. You've got some new wrinkles this past year with two-race weekends, so you're able to kind of keep that in your wheelhouse, and good practice, I guess, for Indy 500, shaking everything down how the team works. The other thing is you have a lot of season open to you. What other challenges would you be going after? Would you be, say, thinking about with Chip Ganassi organization checking out the electric SUV racing circuit or anything like that?

TONY KANAAN: Early in the year -- no, later this year, actually, in the middle of this year, we announced that I'm doing Tony Stewart's SRX series, which is six races during the summer. Luckily they do not coincide with any of the INDYCAR races, so that's another six races there. That makes up to 10. And then we're looking around to some other things, too, maybe do some of the IMSA races, the long races, and there is some possibility of stock cars in Brazil. I think I'll be, now that I have more time, probably busier than I've ever been. Yeah, that is one thing for sure, another six races with Tony Stewart, and that will be a lot of fun.

Q. Do you think Jimmie will look for your advice in INDYCAR, or maybe, this would be funny, if he would show you some ropes in NASCAR?

TONY KANAAN: I think -- he's already asking me tons of questions, and actually the good thing is I am actually asking him tons of questions about NASCAR, but just because I'm sure I couldn't say, not because I'm going to race there. Jimmie is asking me because he needs to know, because that's his job. And for me I'm just -- I have a guy that won so much that I love to hear the stories.

So we've been telling each other stories quite a bit, so hopefully I'll help him with some of my experience so he can be successful in INDYCAR, as well.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks again for being with us today and another congratulations to Tony Kanaan and Chip Ganassi Racing, 24 seasons and counting now, TK. What a great way to head into this holiday week.

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